

Challenges in Early Quran Education: Identifying Factors that Affect Permata Insan Summer Camp Students' Performance

Cabaran dalam Pendidikan Awal Al-Quran: Mengenal pasti Faktor yang Mempengaruhi Pencapaian Pelajar Perkhemahan Cuti Sekolah Permata Insan

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Abstract: Quran education module is a major part in the PERMATA Insan Summer Camp programme for the pre-college gifted and talented students. The annual camp programme integrates STEM modules together with the Quran and Sunnah modules to help students understand and relate science topics with the Quran and Al-Sunnah. The camp participants as young as eight years old were required to memorise selected Quran verses during the camp. Many struggled to perform in the Quran education module. This study was conducted to identify various issues faced by the students in the Quran module. They were tested on their memorisation and later grouped for a special interview session. The findings on the various problems faced by them were analysed and grouped into themes. The discussion with the group of gifted and talented between the age of 8 and 11 years old revealed many concerns that have been found in earlier research on this special group of students. The findings would help further explore better ways to improve the teaching and learning of gifted and talented Muslim students.

Keywords: Gifted and talented students; Islamic civilization; school holiday camp; Quran education.

Abstrak: Modul Pendidikan Al-Quran merupakan unit penting dalam program kem percutian cuti sekolah PERMATA Insan pelajar pintar pra-kolej. Program kem tahunan ini mengintegrasikan modul STEM bersama modul Al-Quran dan Sunah bagi membolehkan pelajar memahami subjek sains berdasarkan tafsir Al-Quran dan pengajian Sunah. Peserta kem berusia dari lapan tahun perlu menghafal surah Al-Quran yang telah ditetapkan sebagai syarat dan penilaian modul kem. Pelbagai cabaran dihadapi para peserta bagi mencapai silibus hafazan yang telah ditetapkan. Kajian ini dijalankan bagi mengenalpasti permasalahan yang dihadapi dalam modul pengajian Al-Quran. Peserta kajian telah diuji, dibahagikan mengikut pencapaian dan ditemubual bagi mengetahui permasalahan yang dihadapi. Dapatan telah dianalisa dan disusun mengikut tema permasalahan. Maklumat dapatan mengenengahkan pelbagai langkah yang dapat diambil untuk membantu pembelajaran Al-Quran yang lebih mantap bagi pelajar pintar berbakat Islam PERMATA Insan.

Kata kunci: Pelajar pintar berbakat; ilmu tamadun Islam; program perkhemahan cuti sekolah; pendidikan Quran.

Introduction

Continuous development of a nation requires a careful planning and implementation of its human resources agenda as well. An education of an individual would have to consider his early education up to his professional development in his later stage of his career. In Malaysia, the effort to make science and technology education the pillars of the nation's march towards industrial and technological competitiveness started right after the independence. Government agencies such as Rural & Industrial Development Authority (RIDA, now MARA) Training Centre were established to produce more local workers who would venture into the relevant science and technology industry and work sector.

MARA had developed an education blueprint that covers the development of wide range of students from primary up to tertiary level (Azly Rahman, 2009). MARA Junior Science College was established in the early 1970s to identify and produce generation of excellent talents in science and technology. The brightest secondary level Malay students became part of the programme to develop the best brain that would be part of the nation's workforce in the future. This was the first attempt by an academic institution to recognise and develop the group of highly intelligent students in this country. The MARA Junior Science had adopted Renzulli's idea on the development of this group of students and applied what was known as School-wide Enrichment Programme (SEM) to guide them in polishing up the ability of the highly intelligent students.

Gifted education is not really a new phenomenon in Malaysian educational setting. Even without specific policies put in place for the gifted education, the Ministry of Education had come up with special programmes that catered the needs of the academically gifted students' community. Since the early 1960s, the Ministry had introduced the Express Class system in government schools. The programme that started in 1962, identified students with high intellectual potential and allowed them to shorten their primary school year by having grade skipping. Similar initiative was taken in 1996 with the *Penilaian Tahap Satu* (PTS – Year One Assessment) test that allowed students with high academic achievement to skip year four of their primary education. Both programmes were deemed as failures due to many issues that had been associated with its implementation (Noriah et al. 2009; Rosadah 2004).

The Malaysian public in general were not so concerned with the educational needs of the gifted students as many of them have a misconception about the gifted as many would regard them as genius individuals who would excel in everything they do. Historically, there was no specific programme created to cater to the needs and requirements of this special group

of individuals in this country. In Malaysia, there were cases of high performing young students who later dropped out from the mainstream academic path and ended up working as a normal labour (Ariffin, S.R. et. al., 2010). Such stories have caught the attention of Datin Seri Rosmah Mansor, the wife of the Prime Minister of Malaysia, who acknowledged this unfortunate event and mooted the idea to develop and support the gifted in this country with the special initiative known as PERMATA programme

The PERMATA programme founded in 2007, was initially targeted at the gifted group of students. It was later expanded and covered the kindergarten children aged between five and six years old, in the programme known as PERMATA Negara. Today it has PERMATA Seni (Art), Kurnia (Autism), *Perkasa Remaja* (teenagers with risk) and the Children Hospital programmes, making it seven PERMATA programmes all together. PERMATA Foundation under the guidance of the PERMATA Department, Prime Minister's Office, coordinated all the programmes. Every programme has set their own vision, mission and objectives, covering different age group from pre-schoolers up to university level (Bahagian PERMATA, 2016).

As for this study, the focus would be on the PERMATA Insan School Holiday Programme which is developed as a form of enrichment programme for the gifted children between 8 to 12 years old. The programme would allow students to learn STEM-based modules together with the Quran and Sunnah modules. This is part of the government's effort to properly develop the knowledge and skills of the identified gifted students and ensure that they would be exposed to as many STEM-based modules before they can enter the PERMATA Insan College after UPSR examination. (Siti Fatimah et. al., 2012).

PERMATA Insan Programme

In many developed countries, the standard national education system includes special programmes of education that caters to different individual needs such as learning disabilities, and different type of health impairments. The gifted group, however, does not belong to any of the group specified in the system. This could be due to lack of understanding and insufficient knowledge from the ministry on how best to cater to their needs. The gifted students are not only highly capable individuals academically, but they are also different when it comes to their personal and psychological care. They require a specialised education system that would develop and prepare them with the right skills and mentality when it comes to their social necessities (VanTassel-Baska, 2013, 2005). They might face various issues when they study in a typical school

environment as teachers and schoolmates do not understand them and create needless problems dealing with them. Typically, they would have to deal with personal psychological issues that other normal students would not have.

There are currently two gifted schools in the country and each is offering special programme for the gifted students. Both institutions are using shared curriculum known as PERMATA High School Diploma that has been adapted and developed from gifted programme in John Hopkins University in the United States (Noriah & Abu Yazid, 2010). The first gifted centre in this country, known as Pusat PERMATApintar Negara™, was established back in 2009 in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi. As for PERMATA Insan, the pre-college programme started in 2010 and the College began its operation in 2015. Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, was entrusted to operate the college and prepare the modules for the summer camp (borrowing the concept applied in John Hopkins University). Students who passed the online intelligent tests known as UKM1 and UKM2 would be invited to attend the camp that offered the STEM-based and Quran and Sunnah modules.

Research Methodology

Problem Statement and Research Questions

The pre-college programme has been implemented since 2010 and the first three cohorts are already studying in the college. The Quran education component together with the prescribed modules of the camp was considered a vital element in the overall programme as it holds the key to success in the integration of Naqli and Aqli knowledge in other STEM-based modules. The students from the first three cohorts, however, did not perform well in the Quran module as many of them struggled to complete the syllabus. All the three cohorts, for example, went through five summer camps and were expected to show the ability to memorise, understand and be able to talk about the lessons from the surah that they had studied. Many could only memorise it but still they could not really recall the surah when they were tested.

This study utilised qualitative approach in order to get the detail of the causes of the problem faced by the students in the implementation of the Quran education module (Creswell, 2014). Earlier interviews conducted with the participants who failed to get into the College revealed that many of them lost their interest and motivation to memorise the Quran during the summer camp programme. A handful of them admitted that they would only put in the effort to study the surah when they attended the camp and did not make the effort to do so at

home or before the camp. In order to identify the problems mentioned by the former camp participants, this paper identified two research questions:

- a. What are the main problems facing the camp participants in performing the Quran module of the pre-college summer camp?
- b. How much did the parents contribute in supporting the students in their study of the Quran?

Data Collection

The sample of the study were camp participants for the June 2016 session. They were made of level 2, 4 and 6 students age between 9 to 11 years old and the participants could be further divided as follow:

- a. Level 2: 9 years old – 39 students
- b. Level 4: 10 years old – 92 students
- c. Level 6: 11 years old – 80 students

For the purpose of the study, the sample were chosen among those who did not perform well in the Quran module based on their performance in the previous camp. They were further divided into those in the lowest score in performance in the camp module. Purposive sampling was used to get the target group of the study (Creswell, 2014). In the interview, students from the sample group were randomly selected to share in a recorded group discussion session. There were six participants from each cohort during the session.

Findings

Based on the interview conducted with the target group, the list of problems was identified and classified into relevant themes based on the feedback given (Creswell, 2014). Many of the issues mentioned by the camp participants were typical problems faced by those who deal with Quran memorisation. Since PERMATA Insan programme only selected students who performed in the online intelligent tests, it could be said here that these problems were unique to the gifted students who are considered to possess high cognitive ability. Gifted students are regarded as a group of individuals with strong memorisation skill and good cognitive aptitude (Abu Yazid & Noriah, 2010).

The problems identified during the interview were common issues for students who studied the Quran in other religious academic institutions. They were factors associated to the environment, parents and Quran-related challenges itself (Aznil & Ab. Halim, 2012). Since they have to rely on personal motivation

and strong self-discipline, many students felt that parents' support as well the Quran teacher's assistance would be vital in their Quran learning quest. Here are the factors mentioned by the sample group during the interview session:

- Lack of support from parents/home environment
- Deprived of good Quran teacher
- Poor command of Arabic language and *Tajweed* knowledge
- Lack memorization technique
- Ineffective learning style/low self-motivation

For the discussion in this paper, two major contributing factors that resulted in the poor performance of the camp participants will be highlighted to give emphasis on the main reasons. The students involved credited the importance of parents, environment and good Quran teacher to help them in the task given to them. Majority of them acknowledged the challenges they face in dealing with the influence caused by their parents who were the party who made the decision in their study. Since all of them had to do the memorisation and attend the Quran class at home, they were also restricted to the so-called rules and regulations set their parents. Priorities were set, and they had to obey them, and this was the point that marked how the performance of their Quran education was affected in the long run.

Discussion

In the interview, participants talked about the challenges they had to contend with when it comes to dealing with their parents' expectations and rules in their academic and school life. Amy Morin (2018) discussed the parenting styles originally found in the research done by Baumrind (1991) who identified four types of parenting styles: Authoritarian, Authoritative, Permissive, and Uninvolved. During the interview, most students basically described that their parents portrayed authoritative style of parenting where rules were clearly laid out so that they would know the priorities in their daily academic life. Students were given ample time to play and indulge in their favourite pastime activities as well and their parents did not expect them to study all the time. The students revealed that they had a fixed timetable and routine in their daily life for school, study, and play.

However, in most cases, their timetable missed the allocated time for Quran class or session. There would be tuition, extra-curricular activities such as Taekwondo, sports or music class. Their daily life was properly scheduled and most did well academically since they were supported with extra class

arrangements and special tuition programmes planned by their parents. The same thing cannot be said about their Quran education lesson and classes. Parents depended on the religious school classes and teachers when it comes to the Quran education for their children. Some parents sent their kids to the neighbouring individuals or religious teacher to get their kids to learn to read the Quran. It was a typical attitude among Muslim parents in Malaysia to plan for their children's Quran education. Perhaps, they were not so bothered with the quality of education their children receive when it comes to religious and Quran education.

In addition, the camp participants also expressed their frustration with the non-conducive environment at home that would encourage the study of Quran in an effective manner. There was no allocated time, class, or tuition provided in their daily schedule as many were encouraged to focus more on their school academic matter and exam preparation. The students moaned the lack of attention on the Quran education as one student related, "It's hard to divide my time ... too much school homework." Some students lamented that, "My parents wanted me to attend tuition classes and do the exercises in our book ... we have the homework to finish too." In certain households, there would be constant distractions being allowed in their home with "Television programmes are always on and my siblings are too busy with their gadgets or game consoles ... no time to look at the Quran." The participants admitted that their activities were monitored by their parents but the choices of activities for school and leisure were too taxing on them. One student complained that, "I felt too tired to catch up with so many things, study, tuition and read Quran ... too much ... too tired to do all." Even during the weekend, one participant said, "I have extra class, revision to do ... to study Quran is just not enough time for me." The other students shared similar stories and challenges they had at home with time management they had to deal with.

Another interesting and widely known factor in the quality of Quran education in many places in this country is the fact that each state in the country applies different approach and syllabus to the teaching of Quran (Noh, 2009). The government religious schools would normally focus their curriculum on the teaching of religious subjects such as *tauhid* (faith), *feqah* (understanding of the *hukm*) and history. Al-Quran education had always been sidelined in the mainstream curriculum since one would require a special—normally private religious school—to offer the teaching of Quran as a subject (Bazli et. al., 2017; Halim et. al., 2013; Roqib, 2009). Even if Quran is taught in the primary school, it would normally be

done before or after the official school hours and only involved selected teachers and students, who are willing to pay extra fee for the class. Even then, students would focus on learning to recite the Quran with the correct pronunciation and *tajweed*. The main aim of this kind of Quran class is to complete the reading of Quran from beginning to the end and having completed this cycle would be considered as “*khatam*” (completed reading the whole Quran).

As compared to the module in the summer camp, students are expected to memorise, understand and recite the surah from any referred page that they have studied. Obviously, this module requires a higher level of skill and understanding of the Quran. With the kind of Quran education they experience at home and school, many could not achieve the goals set for them for the camp. In the camp, they would have special sessions such as *muraja'ah* (preparation to read and memorise the surah) and *tasmi'* (reciting the memorised verses and surah to the teacher). The process of memorisation and understanding of the surah would involve the teacher as students get the chance to learn the words and verses in the surah and relate it to the interpretation of the lesson and idea found in the surah. Obviously, the preparation by the students was inadequate to allow them to follow the syllabus prepared for them during the camp. Lack of guidance and teaching from the religious school and teacher resulted in their poor performance in Quran.

Some of the frustrations echoed by the students include, “We find it hard to get a good Quran teacher and they normally stay far from our house.” There were comments that blamed their inability to learn Quran memorisation technique as they said. “having the memorisation technique and skills would help us because we are not really sure how to memorise effectively.” The available religious schools and teachers are “meant to help prepare for the state religious exam and we don't know much about memorisation and *tasmi'*.” To them, *tasmi'* was a foreign concept or process before they attended the camp, as they recalled, “We were told about it when our *ustaz* and *ustazah* told us to prepare for it during the Quran module. Time allocation for them to memorise the surah at the camp was also noted, “We have to catch up ... many surah and verses that we did not remember ... then, the *tasmi'* session was too short. So many things to do in a short period.” The students could be making excuses though since they felt pressure with the requirement during the camp. Time allocated before they attended the camp should be sufficient to them since the camp was organised in either June or December—ample period for the memorisation effort to take place. Once again, it could be due to the priorities set by their parents or the

students themselves when it comes to spending time with Quran during their leisure time.

Conclusion

Factors that affect the effectiveness of the Quran module could vary between individuals and family background. The parental support in their learning effort was the major factor to determine their success not only in academic but also the Quran module. The module might not get due attention from parents of the participants since they concentrated on their child's academic achievement in school. Investment, in terms of time to study, effort to get a better school and money to hire better Quran teacher were among the reasons that question parents' commitment to nurture their children to be a better student in Quran education.

Other than parents' contributions toward the cause, the society should take the initiative to support religious institutions to build better religious schools and teachers for the kids. It is true that there are many religious study graduates from Middle-East who work in private schools but their approach to Quran education should be tailored towards general students who are not religious-oriented such as those in *tahfiz* and Islamic schools. If the schools and teachers are properly supported, many primary students would benefit from the Quran education programme set in their school. Holistic development of the students involved would augur well for PERMATA Insan programme and related academic efforts in other institutions.

In short, this study was focusing on the Quran education module and the problems that resulted in the poor performance of the camp participants. Even after five series of summer camp, many were not able to achieve the target set for them and they showed signs that the effort to perform well in the module were hampered by the problems that have been identified and listed above in this paper. The findings would help the college to come up with solutions to overcome the problems and issues. Good cooperation with parents and other Islamic education centres could assist the camp participants to develop a better learning environment at home and school. Allocation of time and proper supervision from parents could encourage and motivate the young learners to better prepare themselves in the early Quran education. The strong foundation at the camp level would also be an advantage for them since the College entry requirements include strong knowledge and skill to memorise, understand and integrate Quran in all STEM subjects. The motto “To Nurture Muslim Scholars” would become a realised vision when all

students are able to integrate the Naqli and Aqli knowledge aspired by Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, the developing centre of Islamic research and innovation.

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